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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S BARRANQUILLA VISIT FOCUSES ON
POSITIVE RELATIONS WITH ATLANTIC COAST

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. During an October 30 visit to Barranquilla, Ambassador Brownfield discussed a range of themes -- including U.S.-Colombia relations, U.S. elections, the global financial crisis, corporate social responsibility, and sports diplomacy -- with a wide array of interlocutors. The Ambassador met with a group of University students, the Governor of Atlantico, and the Mayor of Barranquilla. He also visited a USAID-supported fruit-packing facility and addressed invited guests at the tenth anniversary celebration of the Barranquilla branch of the Colombian-American Chamber of Commerce. END SUMMARY.

UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ASK ABOUT FTA AND FARC

¶2. (SBU) During a half-hour address to about 150 students at the Universidad del Norte, the Ambassador spoke about the U.S. electoral college system and the increasing diversity and importance of the Hispanic vote in the U.S. He noted that U.S.-Colombian cooperation is rooted in each country's interest in fighting violence, drug-trafficking, and terrorism, and in promoting greater trade and investment. For this reason, regardless of the outcome of the election, strong cooperation and friendly relations will continue. Students raised concerns about the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement, the impact of the financial crisis, and the future of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

AMBASSADOR STRESSES IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH EDUCATION

¶3. (SBU) Over lunch with Atlantico Governor Eduardo Verano and 20 of his advisors and private sector supporters, the Governor outlined why the Department of Atlantico is an attractive destination for foreign investment, particularly in the tourism and agroindustrial sectors. The Governor also noted the priority he attached to sports, in particular to renovating and expanding Tomas Arrieta baseball stadium. Finally, the Governor noted Atlantico's progress on education, including more exchanges, so called "intelligent classrooms" and a greater number of bilingual education programs. The Ambassador applauded Atlantico's efforts and pointed out the potential for cooperation with several U.S.-based Foundations, such as the "One Laptop per Child" Program. The Ambassador also noted opportunities for collaboration on English language education with the BNC, Fulbright Program, former Peace Corps volunteers in Colombia, and perhaps American teachers during their summer breaks. He stressed the importance of raising the profile of English-language education through advertising campaigns with famous English-speaking Barranquilleros, such as baseball player Edgar Renteria or entertainer Shakira.

¶4. (SBU) Barranquilla Mayor Alejandro Char, whom recent polls

showed to be the most popular mayor in Colombia, told the Ambassador that Barranquilla has the lowest or perhaps second lowest homicide rate in the country at 18 per 100,000 inhabitants. Char also emphasized how he had cleaned up corruption in the city by choosing most members of his cabinet from the private sector. While Mayor Char said Barranquilla had not felt effects of the financial crisis, he nonetheless stressed the need for greater investment in the city. Char outlined several public works projects currently in process, including a highway, which will ring the city, drainage which will bring sewer water to a treatment facility, instead of allowing it to enter the Magdalena River, and the construction of a convention center as part of a plan to revitalize the city center. The Ambassador applauded the Mayor's plans and reiterated his desire for a Colombian baseball league on the North Coast with strong links to Major League Baseball. He also noted the importance of involving the private sector in large social-oriented goals, such as expanded English-language education.

PASSION FRUIT: A PROFITABLE ALTERNATIVE

15. (U) The Ambassador visited the Atlantic Bottling Company, Compania Envasadora del Atlantico (CEA), a fruit-packing facility, which started out 20 years ago exporting three containers annually and now exports 1,300 containers of packaged fruit and fruit products, more than one-third of which go to the U.S. Over 2,000 Colombian families sell their fruit to CEA. The Ambassador spoke with several farmers, who, with technical assistance from USAID, now grow

passion fruit as an alternative to coca or poppy. The farmers explained that passion fruit is also more profitable and stable than coffee or cacao. The Ambassador pointed out the power that these farmers' examples can have on others to do the same.

AMCHAM BARRANQUILLA CELEBRATES TEN YEARS

16. (U) Ambassador Brownfield gave the keynote address at the Tenth Anniversary Celebration of the Barranquilla branch of the Colombian-American Chamber of Commerce. Of the five Colombian branches of the Amcham, Barranquilla is the newest and has grown the fastest, expanding from eight original members to 130 today. Amcham Barranquilla used the event to launch its corporate social responsibility program entitled "Bilingual Export Platform of Barranquilla, Atlantico," which will focus on giving scholarships and educational materials to help students learn English. The Ambassador acknowledged the tremendous work of Amcham Barranquilla and noted how the new program was a win-win for the private sector, which would benefit from more English-speaking employees, increasing its competitiveness, and for the educational institutions, which receive greater resources for teaching their students English.

POSITIVE PRESS COVERAGE

17. (U) The Ambassador's visit received extensive local print and broadcast coverage, which served to emphasize USG soft-side support to the Atlantico Region. PAS organized an exclusive interview with Barranquilla's leading daily, El Heraldo (Liberal Party-oriented editorial line; readership: 357,900) which ran a positive story focusing on U.S. elections. Diario La Libertad (readership: 105,000) ran a story about the visit to CEA and highlighted USAID's work with MIDAS. RCN Radio (listeners: 607,300) featured the Ambassador's remarks at the Universidad del Norte and his visit to CEA.

BROWNFIELD